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United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development

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Barbara Crossette, *The New York Times*

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SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Mostafa TOLBA, Chairman of the fifth session of the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development, discusses issues related to sustainable development and protecting the environment. Of the thousands of endangered species, one hundred become extinct every day. Governments should honour legally binding conventions to protect our environment. Pressure from public opinion is essential to bring about change in the attitude of Governments towards the environment and the protection of human health. On a scale of one to ten, Mr. Tolba rates the achievements in protecting the environment since the Earth Summit at a disappointing three. The situation today is worse than it was in 1992.

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ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues. Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**.

Five years ago, representatives of 172 Governments, including 108 heads of State or Government, attended the Earth Summit. They agreed that urgent action was needed to promote economic and social development while preserving and protecting the environment. To that end, the Summit adopted three key documents: Agenda 21; the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development; and the Forest Principles. To monitor and guide the implementation of these commitments, it also established the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development. What's been achieved since then? And are Governments honouring their commitments? Our guest today is a veteran United Nations official with extensive experience in the environment and development. He is Mostafa Tolba, Chairman of the fifth session of the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development. Joining me to talk with Mr. Tolba are Bhaskar Menon of the *International Documents Review* and Barbara Crossette of *The New York Times*.

Mr. Tolba, welcome to **World Chronicle**.

TOLBA: Thank you very much.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Tolba, you have an admirable record in environmental questions, having served for 17 years as the head of the UN Environment Programme, and before that having been much involved with ecological matters. And of course subsequent to your retirement from the Environment Programme you've continued to be involved, and of course are now Chairman of the Commission. The United Nations and the Member States have produced quite an array of conventions concerning the environment. How well are they being implemented? Are Governments really fulfilling their obligations under these treaties?

TOLBA: Well, on the legally binding conventions, I would say yes. You said there is an array, true. We have CITES, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species, which was the first probably that was negotiated under the auspices of the United Nations Environment Programme; there are probably now more than 150 Governments who ratified that Convention and are honouring very closely —

LITTLEJOHNS: But unfortunately species are still becoming extinct.

TOLBA: That is why we moved from there into the last convention, on biological resources and on biodiversity, because of the extinction of species. Of course, it's a sad testimony to human folly that we still have more than probably 100 species which become extinct every day. I try to make this analogous to somebody having a beautiful library full of information, books which are full of information, and he or she is burning the library without

reading what is in it. And these are the same species that could ultimately give us medicines for serious diseases like cancer, like AIDS. Any one of these various —

LITTLEJOHNS: Now you're talking about plants, mostly.

TOLBA: I'm talking about plants or animals, or whatever you have, any resource, any biological resource, any living organism. Estimates of the number of living organisms in the world vary according to scientists anywhere between 5 million and 100 million species.

LITTLEJOHNS: But one hundred are passing out every day.

TOLBA: One hundred are passing out every day, but the acceptable figure is 30 million species. All that we know of until this moment is 1.3 million, out of the average of 30 million. And one of the assessments I made one day is that it will take all the scientists dealing with taxonomy to identify what we don't know now for the next 500 years before we know where are we going. And yet we are just taking it easy, we are burning forests, we are cutting trees, we are destroying habitats and losing all this which could be the birthright of future generations. And when we know that there is a case in Madagascar, a small plant, which is called periwinkle, rosy periwinkle: this plant, the flowers of that plant gave a medicine for infant disease, an infant disease which was actually killing four out of every five who were infected with the disease.

LITTLEJOHNS: In Madagascar or world-wide?

TOLBA: World-wide. And this rosy periwinkle gave a medicine which is now, out of the five infected, one dies and the four survive. So unless we really take this seriously into consideration, we are going to deprive the coming generations, the people who are not yet born, of their full right to profit from what we are having now and we are taking very lightly:

LITTLEJOHNS: So is the rosy periwinkle a protected plant in Madagascar?

TOLBA: It is. It is now protected. Well, a large body of Madagascar now is a protected area. And that's where — that is where the movement is. And then you've got the Biodiversity Convention, which was one of the conventions also opened for signature and signed at Rio. So, together with the Climate Convention, there were two conventions not negotiated at Rio, not considered as output of Rio, but actually in contact with Rio, opened at that time, and they are considered the Earth Summit conventions. Plus the Desertification Convention, which came as a result of Rio, and the Forest Principles that you mentioned, which we are very heavily negotiating now, trying to get some formula before we go to the General Assembly and this Commission.

MENON: But trying to change the situation which you've described is more or less like trying to stop a big ocean liner. It doesn't stop immediately, you have to slow down and very gradually change its course and turn it round. In this process, I imagine that by now all

the Governments are agreed that the ship must be stopped and turned around. What is it that's slowing down the process? What are the problems that you face?

TOLBA: Well, they probably see that the ship must be stopped, but I don't think that they are ready to have the ship stop. They probably would accept as a first step that the ship slows down its diving into the sea, but I don't think that they have the political will yet to turn it around. And I think the basic question here that you are talking about probably in a turn around the bush way — and I know Bhaskar Menon, how he did that — is hinting probably at production and consumption patterns, which are the only way by which we can change the direction of the ship. There is an understanding that current consumption is wasteful, current production methods are polluting and destroying natural resources, but when you come to specific targets, specific goals in a specific period of time, then you find all the Governments, including ours, yours and mine, the developing countries, getting edgy. They don't want to commit themselves to specific goals and targets. I'm trying my best.

MENON: So what do you think will bring them to a realization that something has to happen, that this is not an infinite situation, that we cannot continue doing this? What do you think it will take for Governments to come to this realization?

TOLBA: If we can manage — and I think this is probably in the hands of the media and the environmental organizations more than the Governments — if we can link —

LITTLEJOHNS: You mean pressure from public opinion?

TOLBA: And the pressure from public opinion will come only if we can link the environmental deterioration and the loss of natural resources to human health. Why I'm saying this is that the only exception, the only most successful case was the Montreal Protocols with the ozone depletion. And the only reason for this is that the public got scared by reports in the media, written press and TV and radio, that the depletion of the ozone layer means increase in the amount of ultraviolet radiation passing through the skies, the stratosphere, down to the human beings and other living organisms. And as far as the human being is concerned, when we talked about, oh, it is going to kill the first elements of the tree of life in the sea and so on, nobody really cared much; but when the physicians came up with the statements that it is going to cause cataracts, and cataracts will increase the amount of blindness by such and such percentage, and it is going to cause skin cancer, and part of this skin cancer is going to be malignant, and there will be such and such deaths, particularly in the United States, and the concrete example came; then what made it very, very seriously looked at, that it was at the time of AIDS, it was a flurry of AIDS at that time, and the physicians came and said, well, look, the ultraviolet radiation also affects the human immunity, it reduces the human immunity. And I started getting telephone calls asking me whether this means that it is like AIDS. And my reaction was yes, of course, it is like AIDS, but not going by a virus, it is

caused by something else: that is, we are the origin of it. When that got known and spread by the media, the public in the developed countries where the public opinion is there, because our public opinion is still very weak in influencing our Governments —

LITTLEJOHNS: In the developing countries.

TOLBA: In the developing countries.

CROSSETTE: In fact, I was going to ask you why the mood was so different before Rio, when there seemed to be sort of a world-wide enthusiasm for environmental causes, and now how people are bemoaning the fact that it's hard to get that enthusiasm up for the five-year review. Could it be something like the necessity of — unfortunate or otherwise, I think we would all agree there's some question — to promote environmental causes? I mean, does it have to come from the West, this enthusiasm? I mean, is this again a question of the media direction being perhaps in a part of the world that dictates the rest of the world's agenda on these issues?

TOLBA: Well, I will say that it dictates the rest of the world's agenda. I would say that this part of the world, the developed countries, you have a very strong public opinion which can influence the policy-makers. They can make or break a senator, make or break a member of parliament, make or break a president or a vice-president. This does not happen in the developing countries. There is some public opinion growing now, but it is not in any way to that level. So if we link climate change, for example, to human life in the United States, I think the position of the United States will change probably in two or three months. If we linked the loss of biological diversity to the life or death of the children in Norway or in London, the position of the Government will have to change because of public pressure. So it is — we failed, and I'm admitting that we failed, to link the environmental degradation outside the issue of ozone depletion to human health and well-being. We are still speaking in general terms about the impact of global warming, that the sea level is going to rise, and that part of my country is going to be flooded.

CROSSETTE: Couldn't there be more done in the developing world? Are you saying that perhaps there is a gap here in focussing on these issues of human health and human development in countries outside the developed world? Is there more that can be done?

TOLBA: No, what I'm saying actually is that somehow the physicians, the medical community, did not probably pay much attention to the negative impacts of the deteriorating environmental resources, whether it is the climate or the natural resources or whatever it is. And I think there should be a request by the scientific community to lend a hand, if we are going to move into the direction of correcting the —

CROSSETTE: Everywhere.

TOLBA: Everywhere, everywhere.

LITTLEJOHNS: This is *World Chronicle*. Our guest is Mostafa Tolba, Chairman of the fifth session of the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development.

MENON: One of the principles you agreed to at Rio was that the protection of the environment would be a central factor in development policies, in the policies of Governments. Is there a single Government in the world that you can point to as having achieved this?

TOLBA: Well, I think probably a number of the Governments in North Europe — Sweden and Norway and Germany. They are definitely taking the environment as a serious component of their policies. And to a large extent the United States is giving priority to the environmental impacts. In fact, the legislation in the United States and in these developed countries is based on the fact that the environment should be respected. And what is probably still missing is a better relation between the costs and benefits — what are the costs of protecting the environment and what are the costs of not protecting the environment. I think it's a fiscal matter rather than policy.

MENON: And this applies also in the attitudes towards developing countries? These — Germany and Nordic countries?

TOLBA: Sure. And they apply the same — in their relations they want to — well, there's a great fear that environmental considerations could be used as trade barriers somewhere, unilaterally, but I think both the North and the South are fully aware that this is not going to fly. So they are taking very careful steps that there will be no more conditionality and no more leaking of things under the guise of trade or under the guise of environment.

CROSSETTE: A lot of NGOs have been suggesting that what needs to come out of this review and in general the environmental movement world-wide is a super-body, some organization that can really, if not police, at least watch and blow the whistle when there's a serious problem, rather like you said the doctors would do over some health issue, or using this. And they're suggesting perhaps that the United Nations Environment Programme should be this central organization. From your long experience there, what — can something be done to make this a stronger centre for world environment?

TOLBA: Well, I have my doubts on that, because it is an inter-governmental body. And if you have an inter-governmental body you can't expect the head of that inter-governmental body, who is an international civil servant, to point fingers at the Governments who are constituting the governing body. The only thing that comes close to this is the Committee on Human Rights, which comes with reports on who is doing what, and then they go into debate and discussion. But in the Environment —

MENON: The Committee or the Commission?

TOLBA: I beg your pardon?

MENON: Did you say the Commission or the Committee on Human Rights? The Committee's an expert body; the Commission —

TOLBA: The Commission for Human Rights. We are still I think a little far from that situation. Because of the history, of course, of human rights, compared to the history of environment and the declarations on environment, the Stockholm Declaration, let alone the sustainable development. So probably in incremental steps, probably gradually, we can move to that. Well, we have — we wanted some of the non-governmental bodies, like the Earth Council that was established by Maurice Strong —

LITTLEJOHNS: The first head of the UN Environment Programme.

TOLBA: The first head of the Environment Programme and the Secretary-General of the Stockholm Conference and the Secretary-General of Rio. So he has been involved in all this. And once he left his United Nations job, he tried to establish a non-governmental body, which is the Earth Council, with the hope that it can watch what is going on. But they still — until now, they are in no position to point the fingers towards Governments. So I think this is — theoretically we are talking now, in the Commission for Sustainable Development, for example, in preparation for the special session of the General Assembly, which we hope will come from there, that there is a need for reporting by nations on what is happening with the various components of sustainable development, whether they are social, economic, or environmental — what they are doing there, what are the difficulties they are facing, how do they see the solutions to this. And then there would be peer reviews by experts of these national reports. You can imagine that difficulty we are facing in Governments accepting the idea of peer review. It is there in the OECD, in the European countries, America, United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Japan — all these so-called "rich club" accept the peer review. They don't have the sensitivities that we still have in the developing world.

CROSSETTE: But to follow your analogy on health, though, look at the World Health Organization, which at least can be good at sounding an alarm, and at being able to field experts, to sort of stay out of the idea of political interference. There must be — or is this — would this also be difficult, given the nature of UNEP or any other body like that, you know, to have some function that — I think most countries don't have any problem with the World Health Organization as a whole, and see it's a very valuable focus for, for example, Ebola virus breaks out in Africa, everyone can turn to a central organization. If you had, for example, an economic disaster somewhere, or one of these new findings on ozone or whatever it would be, that kind — so we would automatically all run to wherever —

TOLBA: Yes, well, both the World Health Organization and the United Nations Environment Programme have been and still are involved in something of that type. In the United Nations Environment Programme there's something from the days of Stockholm called

Earth Watch, and this Earth Watch has within it something called the Global Environmental Monitoring System. The Global Environmental Monitoring System is in combination with all the relevant United Nations bodies all over — the World Health Organization, the Food and Agricultural Organization, the World Meteorological Organization. They review what is the situation, for example, with air pollution, which are the ten most horribly polluted cities in the world. And I didn't take pride in announcing back in 1991 that Cairo was one of the dirtiest, ten dirtiest cities, my own country, as far as —

LITTLEJOHNS: What are the ten, or what are the five? Did you say ten or five?

TOLBA: Ten. The most dirty ten.

LITTLEJOHNS: Which was the dirtiest, by the way?

TOLBA: Well, they are — Mexico City and Bangkok and —

CROSSETTE: New Delhi is coming up.

MENON: New Delhi is coming up pretty fast.

TOLBA: And Delhi and — no — Calcutta.

MENON: Calcutta.

TOLBA: Calcutta and Bombay.

LITTLEJOHNS: Rio itself is probably pretty —

TOLBA: Rio is very polluted, and São Paulo is very polluted. But I was talking of the pollution with dust more than the pollution with things like sulphur dioxide and things which are toxic. There, you find that some of the developed countries have the highest pollution. Like Finland, for example, in the wintertime.

MENON: Can I ask you something? This is perhaps a tricky question to answer, but it might clarify things for our viewers. Five years after Rio, on a scale of one to ten, where would you put the UN on the international achievement scale of achievement?

TOLBA: On a scale of one to ten? You want me to be very honest or to be the Chairman of the Commission?

MENON: Very honest!

[LAUGHTER]

LITTLEJOHNS: Very honest! Honestly only on this programme!

TOLBA: Well, I don't know how far my colleagues on the Commission will allow me to continue as Chairman of the Commission. I wouldn't put it —

LITTLEJOHNS: Take a chance!

TOLBA: I wouldn't put it more than three out of ten.

MENON: Really?

LITTLEJOHNS: Three out of ten!

TOLBA: Yes, yes.

LITTLEJOHNS: -My word.

TOLBA: I am very clearly disappointed. And I think all the ministers who came here from — at the beginning of what was called the ministerial segment of the Commission on Sustainable Development, they were all saying, some of them were so outspoken that they said that the situation today is worse than what it was in 1992.

MENON: Really? But what can an ordinary person listening to this do? Is there something that an individual can do?

TOLBA: Individuals? Well, the things — the individual things that individual people can do is to press their Governments for action. It's, again, the public awareness, the understanding, the feeling that it is not against them, the regulations and the moving towards a more guarded type of development, what is called sustainable development, that changes the consumption patterns, changes the production pattern. The use — we try to get somehow a commitment to what is called factor four or factor ten, which means that if we are producing this glass with one unit of energy and raw materials, we should be, within a given period of time, say four, five, ten years, be able to produce four of these glasses with the same unit of energy and resources. That's not bad energy, but it's going to open vistas for jobs, for new developments, for new wealth, and this would help the community in any country. But somehow we are not bringing the message to the grass roots. There is so much talk about grass roots, about non-governmental organizations representing the grass roots, but the grass roots are not aware of what is really good for them and what is bad.

MENON: But that's what's astonishing about this whole thing, is that the UN itself has done so little to explain what is happening in CSD that it's almost a joke. If you look at the documentation, it's in about 40 or 50 different documents, there is no attempt to focus the documentation, there is no attempt to clarify it; even for journalists who are entirely focused on the unit, it's very difficult to look at it.

TOLBA: Yes. And it's as difficult for the Governments. You don't expect any Government delegation except in the very huge delegations, composed of 50 or 60, to carry these — to read these 40 or 50 documents, even if they are 4 or 5 pages. And so, but I must admit, and I must give the credit where it deserves to be, that the department who is serving the Commission on Sustainable Development is definitely much better this year than what it was last year and the year before and so on. They are coming close to what is understandable by everybody, and very, very brief documents, not the 20 pages and 30 pages that used to flood every delegation with something that big; now it is something that big. It's still big, but I think they are moving in the right direction.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Tolba, on that encouraging note, that's all the time we have. Thank you for being with us on this edition of World Chronicle.

Our guest has been Mostafa Tolba, Chairman of the fifth session of the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development. He was interviewed by Bhaskar Menon of the *International Documents Review* and Barbara Crossette of *The New York Times*.

I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle**.

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